

Stories of a Recovering Fundamentalist:

A Recovering Fundamentalist Retraces Religious Roots Reviewed By Stuart Nachbar

James Alexander's *Stories of a Recovering Fundamentalist: Understanding and Responding to Christian Absolutism* is a first-hand account of an ordained minister's personal journey into his religious beliefs. Alexander is a former a Seventies Jesus Freak; the disciples later became part of the Moral Majority during the 1980's. Three years after his marriage to his current wife Irene, he left the Jesus Freaks and joined a Mennonite congregation. One day he speaks with his Mennonite pastor about the Bible and the pastor responds: "You know, I just can't believe every word of it is true."

The main question Alexander asks at the preface of his story is: "Can human beings know absolute truth?" He does not attempt to answer that question himself, but rather, he writes about those who try to answer it, and try to find the answers in the Holy Scriptures. In his words, the truth among absolutists, deeply devout fundamentalist Christians, is a "court from which there is no appeal."

Stories of a Recovering Fundamentalist is a timely book, as even fundamentalists are reconsidering their political views in light of economic change in our country. Politicians have tried to use fundamentalist beliefs to try to find voters as well as divide an electorate along so-called moral grounds. However, Alexander points out that moral grounds and Biblical interpretations often change with the times. They are never static, and therefore, they cannot be absolute.

Alexander discusses the concept of the "flat Bible," meaning that every page of the Bible is as so; absolutists believe that the Bible is accurate and true as a guide to life. However, the author also discusses passages in the Bible that cannot be enforced, such as the premise that those who work on the Sabbath must be put to death. The concept is similar to the Originalist interpretation of the U.S. Constitution by Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia. On 60 Minutes, Scalia challenged jurists who label the Constitution as a "living document." He said that the Constitution represented the thoughts of its 18 century authors, and therefore, it is a "dead document" not meant to change with the times.

Alexander goes to great effort, in less than 200 pages, to describe differences among fundamentalist beliefs. He provides concise explanations, as well as dismissals of the most common viewpoints of absolutism: That women cannot serve as ordained clergy, that absolutist wives are submissive "1950's television wives," that absolutist and evangelical educational institutions are substandard, that absolutists are pro-military and pro war; that absolutists cannot think or reason intelligently, that absolutists always have an agenda to their social interactions and never show love or honest concern, that absolutists want to rule the world (or the country), that absolutists take the Bible literally and believe the Earth is six or seven thousand years old and, that absolutists are so absolutely certain about religious and non-religious matters that they cannot engage in honest conversation.

Stories of a Recovering Fundamentalist is an excellent book for anyone with an exposure to any faith, Christian or otherwise, who has the curiosity to learn more about the beliefs that have become more prevalent among elected leaders. But the book also forces the reader to consider the meaning of the words "Bible study." There is a reason religious scholars abound in America: to continue the study of unanswered questions. If these scholars keep studying and asking questions, and develop their own interpretations of their holy books, then there is no such thing as a correct answer.

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